

1 Build healthy soil with compost and mulch



Soil is alive, and soil life matters.

A teaspoonful of healthy soil contains about 4 billion organisms! This community of beneficial soil creatures keeps our landscapes healthy by:

- Creating a loose soil structure that allows air, water, and plant roots into the soil
- Recycling nutrients and making them available to plants
- Storing water until plants need it
- Protecting plants from pests and diseases

Get to know your soil. Dig in and take a look.

Use a trowel or shovel to dig 8-12 inches deep. You may find sand (which doesn't hold water well), clay (which won't let water in), compacted layers, or light color indicating little organic matter and soil life.



Feed your soil with compost.

Dig or rototill in 1-4 inches of compost when you're making new beds or planting lawns. Compost works on any soil. It helps sandy soils hold nutrients and water, and loosens clay soils. Compost feeds the beneficial soil life, so it can feed and protect your plants. Healthier soil with compost means healthier lawns and gardens that are easier to care for.

Make compost at home, or buy it in bags or bulk.

Leaves, chopped stalks, flowers, and grass all make great compost in a pile or bin – just add water, keep it moist, and wait 6 months. Vegetable kitchen scraps also make good compost, but should be composted in a worm bin or other rodent-resistant container to prevent pest problems.



Mulch it!

"Mulch" is a layer of organic material like leaves, wood chips, compost, or grass clippings that you spread in spring or fall around your plants. (Keep it about an inch away from stems.) Mulch conserves water, prevents weeds, and feeds the soil for healthier plants.

Mulch improves:

- **Flower beds and vegetable gardens** Use 1-3 inches of leaves, compost, or grass clippings.
- **Trees, shrubs and woody perennials** Use 2-4 inches of woody mulches, like wood chips (get from a tree service) or bark. Fall leaves also work well.
- **Lawns** Mulch your lawn? Yes, you can "grasscycle" (leave the clippings) and spread compost – see Step 5 on lawns.



Mulch stops weeds, conserves water, and builds healthy soil for healthier plants. Spread mulch several inches deep and 1 inch away from plants.

Need fertilizer? Go organic!

Overusing chemical pesticides and fertilizers can damage beneficial soil life, leading to soil compaction and unhealthy plants. Chemicals can also wash off into streams and lakes, where they can harm salmon and other wildlife.

Most trees and shrubs get all the nutrients they need from the soil and annual mulching. But annual plants, vegetable gardens and lawns sometimes need extra nutrients. If you're going to fertilize, look for the words "natural organic" or "slow release" on the bag. Unlike "quick release" chemicals, they won't wash off into streams so easily, and they'll feed your plants a square meal that will keep them looking good longer.

Remember, healthy plants grow in healthy soil.